



Wheeler

Innovative Care. Positive Change.

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Date: February 23, 2017

To: Appropriations Committee

From: Susan Walkama, LCSW
President and CEO
Wheeler Clinic, Inc.

Re: Department of Mental Health and Addictions Proposed Budget

Good afternoon Honorable members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Susan Walkama, and I am the President and CEO of Wheeler Clinic. I would like to thank you for providing this opportunity to speak today on behalf of my colleagues and the more than 22,000 individuals we serve each year.

Wheeler provides a comprehensive continuum of mental health and substance abuse recovery, primary care, community justice, education, child welfare, early childhood and prevention and wellness services across Connecticut. The individuals and families who come to us for care include some of the most vulnerable populations in our state including individuals with serious and frequently co-occurring mental illness and addiction, co-morbid medical disorders and histories of exposure to trauma and violence. The services we provide are highly effective in helping these individuals and families function successfully in the community, diverting emergency room and inpatient hospitalizations, and reducing truancy and recidivism.

We strongly support the conversion of certain state operated services for adults to services provided by community not for profit providers as proposed in the DMHAS budget. Community providers have a history of providing high quality services at a lower cost than state operated programs. We believe our priority should be to maintain or increase service quality and access to care while reducing cost. Conversions of state operated services to community not for profits is a good move in achieving this priority and an approach that could be expanded to other state operated services for both adults and children.

In the DMHAS budget, the Governor is also proposing to cut to \$4.7 million dollars from the mental health and substance abuse grants and annualize \$4.1 million in fiscal year 2017 holdbacks. These cuts, following more than \$26 million in total cuts to DMHAS grants since fiscal year 2013 would further exacerbate the unaddressed addiction and mental health access problem in Connecticut and weaken an already fragile, underfunded service delivery system. For the last two years, Wheeler's adult outpatient population of close to 5,000 has increased by 23% and our service encounters have increased by 43 percent to 46,000 visits annually. Our uninsured rate has also increased to eleven percent close to three times the state average (state rate as reported in the National Health Interview Survey Feb 2017). Referrals for treatment of opioid addiction with medication assisted treatment interventions have also dramatically increased with many of our clients being court involved. We simply cannot meet the demand for service with any further reduction in funding.

Individuals and families in need of critical community-based services will not simply disappear if care is no longer available. Instead, they will have to seek exponentially more expensive services in emergency departments and hospitals, or worse, seek no help at all. They may end up in jails, become homeless; more deeply involved in the court system, or become a danger to themselves or others. The long-term costs to the state and to individuals and families are untenable.

Mental health and addiction services are an indispensable core component of any healthcare system. Please continue to support these vital services for all people in need within our state.